

# MEMORANDUM

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DATE: 5/31/68

TO: Dan Ellsberg

MEMO NO.: 3834

FROM: Konrad Kellen

SUBJECT: ASSORTED AND UNSTRUCTURED THOUGHTS ON YOUR LAST MEETING  
(27 May)

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1. Frank Denton (and others), when pointing to some of the difficulties in obtaining information from interrogees, spoke only of trends. Generally, I think, too much is made of trends, and too little of such aspects as can be perceived as existing at a given time. When looking at an "enemy," we first want to know what he is like, and only then in what direction he is changing, if at all. Aside from the fact that trends can always reverse themselves (for example "morale" in the VC/NVN seems to have been somewhat on the decline during 1967; quite high before the Tet offensive on the basis of believed promises as to what the offensive would do; and then on the decline again after the offensive), a perception of the actual and immediate strength (and weakness) of an opponent is likely to be of greater operational significance. (A Cassius Clay, even if he had been declining steadily for a period of time, may still not be the man against whom my chances would be good in a boxing match.) And fortunately it is much easier, on the basis of competently conducted interviews, to form an opinion on situations than on trends.

2. One thing wrong with M&M was its low sensitivity to feedback. Early returns provided a broad canvass of perplexing contradictions (such as a very low percentage of "win" expectations, without a corresponding high expectation of "lose" expectations). Many weaknesses in the VC were co-revealed with many strengths (which was one reason for considerable discrepancies in the analysis). These many seeming contradictions in the findings, many of which were not true contradictions, should have helped greatly to sharpen the questionnaires if feedback had been used properly. The low responsiveness to feedback was presumably caused by methodological and other uncertainties, and by inadequate direction of the project.

3. When trying to control biases, the main emphasis was always on controlling the biases of the respondent, not "our" biases. But our biases, i.e., those of interrogators, questionnaire designers, analysts, and clients, are the much greater and



more distorting element in an effort such as M&M, and the much harder ones to cope with, even for persons who have long experience with precisely that kind of thing (the determination, through an interview project, of the nature of an enemy, and the tremendous drag for "good news" exercised upon such by "everybody" on our side.) In this connection, experience as a factor in the project was always underrated -- not experience with surveys, or SEA, or data collection and processing, but experience in the very special craft of conducting an M&M project in times of war.

4. In general, the M&M project was disastrously affected by the lack of centralized direction by a person with the specific experience of conducting such a project (i.e., nonmilitary intelligence of an enemy at a time of a hot or cold war). Such centralized direction would have known how to integrate (not reconcile) the products produced by various methodologies into a product that -- despite variegated findings -- would have been of greater use to the client. The answer here is neither monolithic control, laying down rigorous criteria of collection and analysis, nor a "let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred thoughts contend" model, but a firm direction that will let maybe a half dozen conventional and three experimental flowers bloom, and no thoughts (i.e., methodologies) contend, as that is a waste of time and effort.

5. The project was also adversely affected by the peculiar insensitivity of the analysts (of whom there were at various times a considerable number of senior people) as to what was really buried in that gold mine represented by the interviews. This cannot be explained with bias alone, or reliance on certain methods. The most cursory reading of the interviews two or three years ago gave evidence of -- for an outnumbered and outgunned army truly remarkable -- cohesion, tenacity, flexibility, improvisation to psywar, and so on.

6. The question "What to look for" is so bedevilling, and seems so poorly resolved, only as long as it is not realized that no clear compass of what is to be examined can be drawn. An M&M project cannot establish clear EEIs in the way a G-2 effort does, and might just as well relax about it. To look at the enemy means to look at "everything": his history, experiences, opinions, reactions, emotions, activities, observations of others,



and so on. The best way to proceed, therefore, is exactly the way the project did proceed at the collection end: to have omnibus questionnaires, add new questions on to them as new information requirements arise or become apparent, and engage in very long interviews. It also means to be on the lookout at all times for the heuristic element. It means, further, to sharpen certain areas with the help of feedback, not only from analyst to interrogator and vice versa, but also between the project and the client. It means, finally, to reconcile oneself to a degree of remaining chaos in the process which is no more than a reflection of the chaotic nature of war itself. The only thing more misleading and unrealistic than a somewhat, yet not altogether, chaotic M&M project, would be a very neatly structured and executed endeavor.

7. Just as trends and the search for them can interfere with the most sensible conduct of a project such as M&M, so does very often the attempt at establishing ratios, correlations or comparisons. Is the enemy soldier more afraid of B-52s than of artillery? Is (as Gouré believed to have found) his fear of bad GVN treatment a greater impediment to defection than VC surveillance and punishment, or is it (as Harvey Averch stated in his rebuttal to Gouré) the other way around? In the first place, the enemy soldier, like everybody else, may be regarded as a poor judge of his own emotions, let alone of priorities in his emotion mix. In the second place, while there is operational significance in any of these factors by themselves (evidence shows that he is in fact afraid of all four elements), there is little or no operational significance in the establishment of ratios, at least not as long as evidence of all four fears is fairly common in all interviews. (A related example: For twenty years Voice of America researchers have asked audiences what they like "best": The news? Labor programs? Entertainment? Etc. Yet, no matter how these figures come out, the only answer that makes sense -- and is indeed followed by VOA in its programs -- is to continue and, if possible, improve all of them.)

8. In general, the quest for precision is inimical to a project such as M&M. It is sometimes felt that those who argue that way are opposed to modern research methods. Such a generalization may or may not be justified in some cases. In any event, it can be said that the collection and study of data such as those in which the M&M project is involved, cannot be forced into a truly orderly pattern. The unusual frame of mind in which



both prisoners and defectors find themselves; the language barriers; the type of sample; the constantly changing backgrounds of interrogees due to the fluid nature of the war in which they participate -- all make precision not only illusory but in fact misleading when it is insisted on and produced even legitimately. For example, if the analyst shows that 37.8% of the POWs said, felt, experienced, observed ... whatever, he is already misleading his reader, even if the figure is accurate, because the reader is probably a compulsive extrapolator. The figure is purely accidental and irrelevant, and "perhaps a third" would be much better. Naturally, without figures of some kind no research project such as M&M can be conducted, but to de-emphasize them at all cost, and instead emphasize the meaning of responses, is very important in arriving at conclusions. -- Besides, an interview project such as M&M should also try to concentrate much more on what is not said, than it actually has. For example, no prisoner or defector, as far as I know, ever maligned Ho, even in the most open-ended conversations, which certainly means something. All this does not necessarily mean, as some say, that POW and Defector interrogation is primarily an art. That is making things much too easy. First of all, it requires experience in that particular endeavor, not just in related endeavors, such as surveys. To give an overly simple example: Any person with experience in the field knows that captured and defected soldiers talk a great deal about the hardships they have been through. This, by itself, is no indication of poor morale and less still of incipient disintegration; and if the project had only kept this elementary factor in mind from the beginning, it would have saved itself a lot of grief. Conversely, any person with experience in the field also knows that captured or defected enemy soldiers rarely insist on the righteousness of their cause or its ultimate victory, and the number of VC/NVN soldiers who did, and the insistence with which they did, was surprisingly large. This, too, the project disregarded. Any analyst who, seeing such evidence, simply concluded that such stalwarts of their cause were "merely" well "indoctrinated" is either not experienced in or sensitive to the task at hand. (There are some people at RAND who know all that -- for example Alex George -- but they did not participate.)

9. I can never talk about the M&M project without taking issue with the widely held opinion that it was just a boondoggle, a hash, a failure, or worse. While it did promulgate some rather



misleading "analyses," it also provided other products that may have had a quite a beneficial impact. Besides, it produced the wealth of excellent interviews in which -- as can now be seen in retrospect -- the "truth" was indeed contained, in the sense that these interviews showed that the enemy was much stronger and determined than he was supposed to be by those who based actual operational decisions on what they thought he could do. The fact is, further, that nobody and no organization other than RAND, as far as I can see, accumulated such splendid knowledge about the VC; everybody else's information collection seems to have been already deviating from reality at the earliest stages, and only at RAND, as far as I know, was there information, for all to see, that in retrospect confirms, and could in prospect could have predicted, the enemy's capabilities to frustrate increasing U.S. efforts for years. The fact, of course, that the true meaning of all this basic information -- or most of it -- failed to find its way into the policy stream -- or at least not until very late -- was not just the "fault" of the project or its analysts or its directors, though they deserve to be faulted. The fault also lies elsewhere. In the first place, the basic conviction of people in RAND and the U.S. Government that things were as we wanted to see them was so strong as to provide just simply too unfavorable a climate for anything "contrary." In the second place, the M&M project may just seem more of a failure because it was put to the test, so to speak. Other projects in and out of RAND that have produced theories and "findings" that have never been so far put to the test (primarily on nuclear war) may turn out to be even more of a "hash" if reality should catch up with and make a shambles of them.

*Kellen*  
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Addendum: I think that there is definitely a considerable transferability of the M&M experience to all interviewing efforts connected with research on poverty, the Negro situation, etc. One reason is that the Negro, much like the Vietnamese peasant, not only wants and needs certain things, but is very concerned over how he gets them. Being in the weaker position he cannot but be much more sensitive than his benefactors ("benefactors"?) to the intangible but critical role they begin to play in his life when they begin to help him reshape it; and all interviewing that deals with people who are at a great disadvantage and not only have much to gain, but a great deal more to lose, too, than is perhaps generally recognized, encounters very specific and thorny problems, mainly in the form of interviewer bias rather than interviewee distortion. This can very probably to some extent be reduced by lessons learned from programs such as M&M.